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Loop 202: Meetings start up next week

By Doug Murphy

March 16, 2007 - 9:17AM

After a long breather, the Arizona Department of Transportation is recalling the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team to review and help update plans for the South Mountain Loop 202 freeway.

But don't expect next week's meeting to result in life-altering decisions, such as whether the proposed freeway will be above or below ground or what kind of sound barriers will be built.

According to ADOT spokesman Tim Tait, the first two meetings will focus more on creating the process and procedures for the CAT than making any substantive recommendations.

"An orientation for new members, and at the same time for the CAT, on how to operate as a team," is how Tait described the 5:30 a.m. March 22 meeting that will be held in the ADOT headquarters in downtown Phoenix at 206 S. 17th St.

The meetings are open to the public, but aren't public meetings in the legal sense of the term. So while people can attend and listen the proceedings, it will be up to the CAT to decide if they want to take questions from the audience, Tait explained.

The last time the CAT met was 11 months ago when it recommended a freeway route on the west side of the project that would connect with Interstate 10 at the current Loop 101 interchange. That recommendation was rejected by ADOT officials, which instead opted for the original 1988 path along 55th Avenue to I-10.

The decision to ignore the CAT's recommendation after five years of meetings upset many members, all of whom are volunteers representing local groups that would be affected by the freeway including homeowners associations, chambers of commerce and village planning committees.

Almost half of the 21 CAT members who were in on the west side recommendation resigned afterwards, resulting in many new members who need to be brought up to speed.

Once the CAT gets back on its feet, ADOT hopes to hold monthly meetings focusing on specific elements of the Pecos Road alignment, the only option now on the table for the east side of the project.

Details are still being worked out, but some topics that could be discussed at future meetings include raising or lowering the freeway to cut down on noise, which would also mean the demolition of more Ahwatukee Foothills homes. Cutting through South Mountain Park could also be a controversial topic, since the mountain has great religious significance to the Gila River Indian Community and some say the legal authority to cut through the park is questionable.

The South Mountain Loop 202 freeway was put on the maps in 1988 to connect I-10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, extending west through South Mountain Pak and then turn to connect with I-120 in the west.

Because of funding woes the project was put on the back burner with alternatives including a toll road on the Gila River Indian Community and a parkway built by the city of Phoenix considered at one time or another.

In 2002 ADOT decided to revisit the 1988 plan and bring it up to date. Since the original plan, the Loop 202 design has grown from six lanes and a median to 10 lanes, and the water retention areas have expanded to accommodate runoff in Ahwatukee Foothills that used to wash over the Indian land.

And because the freeway is now wider and ADOT didn't buy all the land in the proposed right-of-way, an estimated 255 Ahwatukee Foothills homes would have to be demolished to make way for the Loop 202.

In 2004 voters approved extending a half-cent sales tax dedicated to transportation that included \$1.1 billion for the freeway if it is built on Pecos

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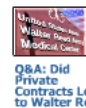
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Opponents have organized, citing concerns over health and air quality, particularly with so many Ahwatukee Foothills schools near the route. They created PARC, Protecting Arizona's resources and Children (www.protectazchildren.org), a non-profit organization that is prepared to take the state to court.

"We need to leave a legacy of responsible planning," said Melanie Pai, founder of PARC.

For more information on the South Mountain Loop 202, visit <http://www.southmountainfreeway.com/southmtn/CAT.htm>.